4 Villa Rojas E-4,5 (1938-1944) 1969 NV9 Tzeltal NV9

9. The Tzeltal

ALFONSO VILLA ROJAS

131 OCCUPYING A REGION east of the Tzotzil, the Tzeltal live in the central part of the state of Chia-
133 pas, Mexico. Three natural zones divide this land: gentle slopes and plains in the south (Amatenango del Valle, Aguacatenango, Pinola, Soyatitan, and Socoltenango), high peaks and irregular terrain in the central part (Chanal, Oxchuc, Tenejapa, Cancuc, Abasolo, and Tenango), lower peaks toward the north.

Geography and Demography

13 Vegetation varies with climate and altitude. In the temperate or cold lands, evergreen oaks and pines predominate; in the lower and warm areas are high evergreen forests, alternating with savannas and subdeciduous forest (F. Miranda, 1952, vol. 1, ch. 3). In
[245] the temperate and the warm zones coffee and a great variety of fruit trees—orange, annona, peach—are cultivated.

133 Few rivers of any volume cross the moun-
[487] tainous terrain. None are navigable. The hydrographic system is delimited by the Usmacinta and Grijalva rivers, the former

[P. 195-A]

4: Villa Rojas E-4,5 (1938-1944) 1969 NV9 Tzeltal NV9

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162
103
131
197
631

TABLE 1—DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION BY MUNICIPALITIES
(Census of 1950)

Municipalities	Area in sq. km.	Tzeltal-speakers	Spanish-speakers	Total Population
North Zone:				
Sitala	550	5,435	1,385	6,821
Yajálon	145	6,026	4,010	10,036
Chilon	462	9,049	2,070	11,118
Ocosingo	12,143	9,170	3,770	12,940
Subtotal	13,300	29,680	11,235	40,915
Central Zone:				
Chanal	192	2,328	553	2,881
Oxchuc	42	4,074	1,338	5,412
Tenejapa	67	6,215	1,535	7,750
Altamirano	1,559	2,945	1,810	4,655
Subtotal	1,860	15,462	5,236	20,698
South Zone:				
Teopisca	270	754	4,601	5,355
Amatenango	355	1,773	756	2,529
Pinola	185	1,384	5,736	7,120
Subtotal	810	3,911	11,093	15,004
GRAND TOTAL	15,970	49,053	27,564	76,617

162
191
631

TABLE 2—SPEAKERS OF TZELTAL
(Distribution by Zones)

Zones	Monolingual	Bilingual	Total
North Zone	23,429	8,251	31,680
Central Zone	11,291	4,171	15,462
South Zone	323	3,588	3,911
TOTAL	35,043	16,010	51,053

[P. 196-A]

5: Blom & LaFarge A,E-4,5 (1925) 1927 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Bachajón

CHAPTER XV

THE NORTHERN TZELTAL TRIBES

Ever since leaving Zona Sala, we had been working in the country of the Tzeltal-speaking tribes who form an outpost of the Highland Indians. The Bachajon, of the Finca Encanto and Bachajon village, and the Indians of Ocosingo and the neighbouring valleys, living as they do, cut off from the outside world, strong in number, and of a rather independent disposition, gave us the first evidences of how little the Indian of the Chiapas Highlands has changed since the days before Columbus. The kings and priests are dead, the temples have been replaced by churches and Christian forms, but the Indians and labourers of today in many respects live the life that their humble forebears did five hundred years ago.

At this point, before describing our trip up into the true mountain country, it seems opportune to tell something of these people, their manners and customs. We did not have time to make an exhaustive study of any of them, but they were constantly with us as guides and labourers, and we passed through many of their villages. At El Encanto we had a chance to visit and examine the settlement of the finca's workmen, with the kind help of Señor Ciriaco Aguilar, who acted as interpreter and supplied us with invaluable information. Señor Arturo Tovilla helped us with the Linguistic Lists (see Appendix III), as well as describing many of the customs recorded in this chapter. Señor Aureo Cruz of Toniná dictated a Tzeltal Prayer and Conversation, which was analyzed with the help of Señor Manuel Bulnes of El Real. (See Appendix VI). In general it may be said that all the Spanish-speaking people with whom we dealt helped us in every way possible.*

The Bachajon (*Batcahon*) and Ocosingo Valley Indians are, as has been said, an outlying part of a large group living in the mountain country. They speak the Tzeltal language, belonging to that branch of the great Mayance stock more closely related to Maya. In the pine country of Chiapas they hold the largest share of land, occupying an irregular area running southeast from Simojovel to

*The written sources bearing directly on the ethnology of these people are very meager. Nuñez de la Vega (1702) gives the best account of the early religion; his section on Nagualism has been reprinted by Paniagua (1908) along with an important selection of other early sources. Licenciado Vicente Pineda (1888) in his account of the Indian uprisings, gives some information, together with the most complete linguistic material. He gives a native calendar, probably based on one published by Emeterio Pineda (1845). Of modern scientific works, Starr (1901 and 1903) has ethnographic material, and publishes the only physical measurements (1902). Seler (1898) goes into the calendar in detail. For comparative material Tozzer (1907) and Sapper (1923) have been our chief reliance. Sapper's "Nordliche Mittelamerika" (1897) was in constant use in the field for information on all subjects. Particular references are given as they occur. Prof. Rudolph Schuller kindly allowed me access to his manuscript material.

5: Blom & LaFarge A,E-4,5 (1925) 1927 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Bachajón

13 10 the Guatemala border, which it overlaps at Gracias á Dios. They do not reach the highest part of the mountains. For the most part they live in isolated tribal groups, although in some places, notably in Ocosingo Valley, they are attached to *haciendas* and *fincas*. Much of the easternmost country marked in the maps as belonging to them and the Chol is actually uninhabited wilderness, or, if occupied at all, is Lacandone territory.

10 197 Their immediate neighbours of the Highlands are the Zotzil and Chaneabal. The former speak a language differentiated from Tzeltal only by a shift of *a, e,* and *b* to Zotzil *o, i,* and *m,* respectively.* Chaneabal is spoken by a small group near Comitan. The people of that place say that the language is simply Tzeltal influenced by Mames contact. The list given in Appendix III, seems to bear this out. To the north, and around Tumbalá, are the Chol Indians, whose language is quite distinct, but, of all the other Mayance tongues, probably the nearest to the Highland group.

197 The language itself has been variously named Cendal, Tzendal, Cendales, Tzental, and Tzeltal. I have taken the latter form, as it most nearly represents the Indians' own form, *ts'eltal,* varied in careless speech to *tceltal.* The villages are spoken of as tribes, because each one forms a separate, self-governing unit. There is no evidence of cohesion within the language-group as a whole save during certain periods of uprisings. Individual villages may resemble tribes of another speech more closely than they do those of their own. The Mexican spelling of Tzeltal names is given first, followed by the phonetic spelling (See Appendix III), and the translation, if known.

197 628 [104]

101 The Bachajon live on the threshold of the pine country. Their farms may be found hidden away in the thick jungle land of mahogany and palms, through which their little hidden trails lead to houses tucked away out of sight of alien travelers. Altogether, they are estimated at five thousand families, but it is doubtful whether evidences of more than fifty farms could be seen by one passing along the trail through the heart of their country. The capital, Bachajon Village, is among the pines. There, periodically, the Spaniards used to round them up, that they might be more easily policed, and for the benefit of the church established there. Once there was a fine, stone church and a neat Cabildo with white walls, colonnade, and tiled roof. Both have been wrecked by the Indians, apparently because they did not like to be reminded of alien domination, for from the wreckage of the old church, they took tiles to roof their new one, and they have a straw-thatched Cabildo for the Maestro, or government agent.

[131] [137] [161] [648] [346] [344]

*Starr (1903) quoting Sanchez (1890).

7: Nash E-5 (1957-1967) 1970 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Amatenango del Valle

Chapter 1

Spirits and Places

Social space is the cognitive pattern of relationships imposed upon any terrain. In Amatenango del Valle[1] there are two superimposed patterns. One is defined by the nation for the purposes of political administration. This follows the pattern of colonial administration of *municipios,* or townships, with a *cabecera,* or administrative center, containing the church, town hall, and school house, and serving a number of colonias and *rancherias,* local hamlets or nuclei of populations. The other pattern is defined by the inhabitants using Tzeltal terminology or a Tzeltal rendition of a Spanish name. In this pattern, domains of good and bad spirits are defined, and behavior appropriate to each place is specified in myths and rituals. Persistence of this pattern has had profound implications for continuity of pre-Conquest culture. It provides a ground plan for the system of social control and security exercised by the old gods and their human intermediaries.

In the following section, I will discuss first territorial divisions defined by national law and modified by indigenous categories, and then the interaction between the spirits of persons and places.

The Territorial Divisions

The township of Amatenango del Valle is located at 92°30′ longitude and 16°30′ latitude in the highland zone of the state of Chiapas. The town center is located no more than fifty yards from the Pan-American Highway twenty-five miles southeast of the departmental capital of San Cristóbal.

1. I use the national designation derived from Nahuatl, Amatenango del Valle, to refer to the township, and the Tzeltal term Tzo?ontahal to refer to the center.

7: Nash E-5 (1957-1967) 1970 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Amatenango del Valle

Chapter 7

The Formal Organization of Local Government

The formal organization of civil and religious offices in Tzo?ontahal is based on the pattern of a locally independent, democratically elected officialdom introduced by the Spaniards. Variations in the pattern from that of other towns of the highlands have resulted from differences of interpretation of the functions, the range of power, and the course of succession of offices. This flexibility has preserved structural continuity as organizational adjustments are made. The Indians have transformed an alien governing mechanism into one that meets their changing needs and contributes to their independence in the modern world.

The independence of the local township has a base in the pre-Conquest social organization of Chiapas. Robert Adams (1961:347) has noted the absence of architectural or other features indicative of functional specialization that would arise in a politically integrated region. At the time of the Conquest, Chiapas was divided into warring principalities, revealing the extreme political fragmentation of the area (Calnek 1962:8). Each town was divided from the neighboring town by *mojones,* hilled-up boundaries (ibid:36). A minimum of political unity was achieved by holding certain towns subject to the dominance of others (ibid:27); local autonomy persisted, however, in the administration of landholding as a community enterprise.

During the colonial period the Spanish Crown established the independence of towns directly under their control and provided them with a civil-religious hierarchy which has persisted as the form of government to the present (Carrasco 1961: Wolf 1957b).

Comparative studies of the civil-religious hierarchy indicate the range of

8: Hunt E-4,5 (1958)1962 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Amatenango
Aguacatenango

CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL BACKGROUND FOR A CONTROLLED COMPARISON

Geography and Ecology

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131 The communities selected for this study are located in the southwest quarter of the state of Chiapas, which is the southernmost state of the Republic of Mexico. This is a mountainous area
[133] belonging to the Sierra Madre Occidental, and a part of the state's Central Plateau. The Plateau Summit of the area is to the north northwest of the villages, and contains the city of San Cristobal las Casas, ex-capital of the state (the present capital, Tuxtla, is in the lowlands).

The villages themselves are situated in the terraced margins of the plateau, which extend to the South into the Grijalva River Depression, and to the north and east into the Lacandon Jungle.

133
487 The slightly inclined terraces are criss-crossed by sev-
491 eral small streams tributary to the Blanco River, and by a complex network of paths, trails, and roads, including a section of the Pan American Highway which connects Mexico City with Guatemala and which is being constructed.

131
36 The villages of Aguacatenango and Amatenango are in two contiguous valleys (see Fig. 1) near to the section of the Pan

[TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 16]

8: Hunt E-4,5 (1958)1962 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Amatenango
Aguacatenango

102
131
133
361

Fig. 1.--Physiographic Sketch of the Valleys of Amatenango, Aguacatenango and Adjacent Towns.

8: Hunt E-4,5 (1958)1962 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Amatenango
Aguacatenango

American Highway which connects San Cristobal de las Casas with Comitan. They are 50 and 44 kilometers, respectively, from San Cristobal. Aguacatenango is closer to the branch road that continues south from the Highway to Venustiano Carranza, in the lowlands.

Both villages are 2,000 meters above sea level, placed in a slightly raised terrain in the valley floor.

The vegetation climaxes surrounding the settlements are the same: woodlands of pine and oak, the second predominating, grasslands which for the most part are secondary growths in abandoned agricultural plots, and thorny bushes which the inhabitants of the valleys utilize for building fences.

The range of cultivated plants is the same in the two villages, including several varieties of corn and beans, squash and a few greens, while other edible plants grow wild in the edges of streams and rocky places unsuited for cultivation (Kaplan in McQuown et al., 1959, Part II, Section 6).

The soils are mainly limestone base, calcareous clay loam and loam transported, both territories receiving the same amount of rain. Surface water is drained internally within the basin of the Rio Blanco, and in the edges of the village of Aguacatenango, forms, during the rainy season, a small lagoon, where a variety of small fish thrive (Wagner, in McQuown et al., 1959, Part II, Section 5).

The fauna include small deer, ocelots, snakes (poisonous and non-poisonous), domestic and field rats, and other small animals.